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Fit for the flexible future?

Report on the SCONUL Buildings Visit, December 2006 to University of Glasgow Library and Glasgow Caledonian University Saltire Centre

Adam Edwards

Deputy Librarian, Roehampton University

Tel: 020 8392 3454

E-mail: adam.edwards@roehampton.ac.uk

Faye Jackson

Head of Library User Services, Roehampton University

Tel: 020 8392 3351

E-mail: f.jackson@roehampton.ac.uk

Michela Wilkins

Head of LRC Operations, Roehampton University

Tel: 020 8392 3211

E-mail: m.wilkins@roehampton.ac.uk

All pictures are by the authors and were taken during the visit

DESIGN PRINCIPLES

As a primer for the actual visits to the buildings, the two days began with Ros Smith from JISC and an overview of the key issues in modern learning design as covered in *Designing spaces for effective learning*¹ which she wrote for JISC. Key customer expectations are that everything will be online and that buildings should inspire people to learn. To make this happen learning spaces should:

- Reflect the strategic vision of the university and be shared by all stakeholders
- Have technology which is pervasive, flexible and active
- Be social and inclusive, enabling collaboration learning from others
- Contain digital resources which are unobtrusive but easy to find and use
- Contain embedded AV
- Flexible and future proof, for example wireless everywhere.

Examples of this new type of space are the *Learning Grid* at Warwick, which has 24x7 access and is staffed by student guides and whose ethos is management 'by you for you', and the *Saltire Centre*, which is now so successful as a social hub (as we saw on day two) that it needs more quiet study spaces. In response to questions at the end from delegates, Ros commented that staff also need good quality space, but that this needs to be open plan too so staff mix and are open to customers and so that they can be found when necessary. Key people are the technical support staff to ensure kit actually works. She also suggested institutions need to experiment with bold ideas citing the example of the *Learning Café* which had been the forerunner to the *Saltire Centre*.

Sheila Cannell (University of Edinburgh) then briefed us on her plans for updated research spaces in the refurbished library² (we think we can see where the SCONUL visit will be in a couple of years time!). In many ways the key features echo those for learning:

- An intellectual hub to inspire creativity and scholarship
- A focus for activity which will be hybrid and interdisciplinary

- Open and flexible space which celebrates past and current achievements (e.g. exhibitions on current academic activity)
- Social space for conversing and engaging

One problem with the design work has been the self perception of the researchers who are convinced they use the library more than they actually do and many of whom don't need to use the library at all, given the use of Google Scholar and online resources as the tools of the trade. Indeed the pressure to publish more and more each year means they have less and less time to use the library, so the new design really needs to make an impact if researchers will be attracted to it. Some needs the new design will have to address are:

- The need for more space, which means reducing the books on site by 30% through a policy of active collection management (much of the 30% is science journals replaced by electronic access)
- Increased use of special collections, where digital access and information is promoting their use
- Support – Edinburgh plans a combined IT and library help desk with more support staff in the building at the expense of space for stock
- Work space which is not group work space, for example lockable roll top desks with good task lighting and wireless access
- A place library staff will use too so they interact with researchers
- Good coffee!

At Edinburgh this translates into exhibition space, secure reading area, a mixed staff and user area and a garden with good quality interior design to make it attractive enough for people to seek it out. However, perhaps the most exciting thing we can possibly look forward to is sound sensitive wall paper which Sheila found when researching the project, which is designed to glow when the library gets too noisy. By the end of her talk, everyone was clamouring for the URL³!

GLASGOW UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

If Adam had known Glasgow's library was 12 stories tall (200 seats and 2M books), he might not have attended, being one of those people who doesn't have much time for heights and certainly not keen on floor to ceiling glass at high altitude. Fortunately there was so much to see both inside and out – spectacular views of mountains we got – it wasn't too bad.

The building dates from 1968 and suffers from a number of on going problems, the most serious (and yet to be resolved) being the leaking exterior cladding. Since 1996 there has been a rolling programme of refurbishment which is now almost complete. This has included:

- A new level 12 special collections floor which takes advantage of the building being strong enough for two extra floors. The space has 3m high rolling stacks weighing 20 tonnes each (a statistic to make the knees wobble that high up) on a concrete floor a metre above the roof of the original library and thus fire proof. This freed space for
- A very large short loan collection in the former basement, but now entry level to the building (which removed the DDA non-compliant steps). This uses RFID technology for self issue and return, but keeps tattles for security as the RFID tags are very obvious. Short loan is one week or less, so 50% of the loans are from this area of the library. We saw an RFID wand in use, vital as the stock in the collection is well used so easily misplaced.
- The former entrance floor (which has a much higher ceiling) is now a reference collection floor with help desk and a huge copier room, there being no copiers elsewhere in the building.
- Other floors have been refurbished in pairs as there are light wells linking them. On our tour round particular features were sofas with the student shown getting the full library paparazzi treatment, lap top friendly arm chairs (see picture which also shows the light wells between floors) and a research room where visiting researchers can book a desk from one day to twelve weeks.

As always when touring libraries you pick up good ideas. Adam's from this tour was that of library scholarships. These are fixed fee specific projects which the library needs researching and which it employs students to do. By being fixed fee, the library knows the work can be afforded and they provide useful opportunities for students to do practical research which then leads to better services for all.

After the visit we heard from Robert Kilpatrick (Estates, Glasgow) and David Thirwell (Jacobs Babbie Consultants) about the technical aspects of the project. For the librarians on the visit this was all perhaps a bit technical, but Michela was thrilled to be hearing about building work, boilers and light fittings which she finds much more interesting than cat and class. Particular problems they have dealt with are:

- Separating the library's heating system from that of other buildings so that work on the library doesn't also mean making other buildings unusable
- Life expired heating system unable to cope with extra student numbers
- No networking and not enough power for PCs
- Building not compliant with modern DDA and fire standards
- Water vulnerable to legionella
- 'Sick building' issues of heating, lighting and ventilation
- Energy inefficient lighting
- Glare and solar gain from large windows
- Gloomy décor described by users as grim and dull

Refurbishing each floor pair takes 17 weeks (between end of the summer term and start of the autumn term) including 2 weeks to remove stock (6000m) and then reinstall, 2 weeks for asbestos removal. That leaves just 13 weeks actual time for building works. An added complexity is then creating external access to the floors up the side of the tower. The most recent pair of floors has cost £2.2M, with some £10M spent in the past six years on the project. An important feature of the project planning has been that after each summer's work, a review is carried out to learn from what happened so that the following year's work is better. Each year's work has been separately tendered to ensure lessons learned can be put in the tender.

What has been gained, as we saw, is much better more flexible space, better finishes, better furnishing, more group space and full air-conditioning.

So how do we know this was value for money? Jacqui Dowd (University of Glasgow Library) gave us a short overview of the LibQual survey results which show clear improvement as the building has been improved, particular from postgraduate students. In particular she highlighted the introduction of noise zones from 2003 as a major success.

SALTIRE CENTRE, GLASGOW CALEDONIAN UNIVERSITY

The Saltire Centre is a truly striking building and is on the front cover of the postgraduate prospectus for the university. How many other libraries are so prominently placed to symbolise their institution? We were all very keen to learn how we might achieve the same elsewhere.

Day two opened with presentations from Colin Allan (BDP Architects) and Val Clugston and Scott Mason (Nomad – interior designers). Colin took us through the features design of the building which included:

- Non-traditional look, reflecting the diverse nature of the students (28% are part time with an average age of 24)
- Landmark building, hence the drum feature
- Flexibility in use of space
- Use of technology including 150 laptops for loan
- Colour to indicate location
- Bridges to link existing buildings through the centre (visible in the photo either side of the centre) which did raise obvious concerns about security for the stock, as the centre has five entrances
- Energy efficiency – atrium to trap heat with fresh air cooling of concrete slabs at night (as seen at Coventry and Open on the previous buildings visit)

- A central wall to separate the noisy from quiet areas
- Glass to enhance visibility, but translucent not clear on the north side to hide the M8 inner ring motorway.
- Design spend concentrated on what is at eye level
- Books in rolling stacks to free space for technology and study (and on the basis that printed stock will dwindle in the future).

Interior design is a striking feature of the building from the use of wood in the atrium, to the design of different seats (including bean bags) to the art on the walls and of course the inflatable pods for instant group work space. Nomad's starting point was the Learning Café which the university had built as an experimental predecessor. One interesting point they made was that in comparison with the commercial sector, we have a much wider age range with much more diverse needs, so simply applying design from the business world is not the answer.

As research for the project a lot of time went into finding out how people use spaces. For example, observation of students led to the use of square desks for PCs, not long rows. A fascinating activity was journey mapping where students were followed (someone did dub this as 'stalking'). This mapping of students wandering round looking for PCs resulted in the departure board information screen (a very large screen in the centre entrance) including a constantly updating bar chart showing where free PCs can be found. Other activities used were cultural probes where users completed a diary of activities and comments and focus groups with academic and service staff. One thing not to do is ask direct questions as you will not get a real answer. Make sure you ask abstract questions and back up with observation of what people actually do (rather than think they do!)

From this work evolved the idea of the centre as a central market place with each floor having a distinct identity using big floor numbers, sounds (the 4th floor says 'shush' as you enter!) and landmarks, which are things such as help points, self issue machines and LED information displays. All this is particularly useful for clients with some disabilities where bland uniformity is unhelpful and confusing.

Some ideas were dropped. For example, the idea of a 360 degree service desk had been tried elsewhere and failed as users need to know how to approach a desk and staff need places for stuff without which they cannot work.

The visit then went on a tour followed by a plenary session on the building. Points of interest we noted were:

- The centre is hugely popular and suffering from very high use, a good problem to have. The Student Union are very pleased as with more students on campus staying later to work, they are making more money in the Union!
- Surveys at the five exits suggest there is not a theft issue, the alarms being most often triggered by stock from other libraries. The belief is that the quality of the space has encouraged a sense of ownership. In addition the added value of the increased use as the centre is easy to drop into makes this worth the risk. There is also extensive CCTV cover and the building is not open 24x7, closing at 23:00.
- The roof garden has seen little use as the limited fire exits means a limit to numbers allowed on it, which is impossible to easily police.
- Rolling stacks were introduced following observation of the actual use of the stock in the old library. This suggested that people browse the catalogue and then find a specific item rather than browsing the shelves. The stock in the stacks is that on longest loan, but in spite of this there still have been some problems with access at peak times in the run up to submission of course work. The solution is to have more gaps with a 1:5 ratio of gap to stack, rather than the installed 1:10.
- A book stock handling area where returns are sorted is publicly accessible. A lot of high use stock then never needs to be shelved as it is rapidly borrowed.

- The Base (which is a multifunction issue desk and enquiry point) is backed up by roving helpers (students), a phone help line and self issue/return on every floor. The combined desk involved major re-training for the centre staff. Enquiries are handled diagnostically using an FAQs list and aims either to deal with the basic enquiry immediately or to make an appointment for the person to see an expert. The aim is to not waste customer time with people sent from place to place.
- Furniture plays a key role in defining use and changes behaviours, so for example no bean bags in silent study areas. With hindsight, too many single study spaces were removed and so there has been work done to put them back in.
- Much work still needs to be done to get teaching staff to change ways of teaching and thus use the centre to the full.
- Fines income is down as users are in so frequently, their books are being renewed too often!

As with the previous year, this was a very useful two days and our thanks go to all those who organised the visit, particularly the two libraries for taking the time out from busy term time days to show us round and answer our questions. The common themes of flexible space, inspiring interior design and learning as a social activity will no doubt be influencing future library designs. At Roehampton we are in the midst of a major re-jig of the LRC and these ideas noted will hopefully be finding their way into our LRC. Please can we have three places on the next visit?

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